

Propaganda posters

During World War One, posters were used to efficiently convey messages to the people of England and the empire. They expressed the violence of the war, its global nature, the need for recruits and funds to sustain the war effort...

John Bull calling for volunteers



Source

This is a color lithograph of a medium size (74 x 50 cm). It was printed in Newcastle-on-Tyne in Northeast England but was created in London by the Parliamentary Recruiting Committee (PRC) in 1915. This information can be found in small prints at the bottom of the poster. The poster is available online through the Library of Congress website at: <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/wwipos/item/2003675386/>

Description

A man is standing in the foreground. He's a middle-aged, short, plump man. He's wearing leather boots, white pants, a dark jacket and a black top hat. His waistcoat is decorated with the British flag. He has grey sideburns. He has a cane in his left hand. His right hand is pointing at the persons who are looking at the poster.

In the background, men in uniform are lined up. They seem to be standing at attention, with rifles in their right hands. Behind them, on the left, a building is burning up in flame.

The rest of the background is just shaded in a light brown color. There are two lines of text, above and under the characters. At the top of the poster, a question is asked: "Who's absent?", in large capital letters. At the bottom another question is asked: "Is it you?" with "You" underlined.

Analysis

The main character is John Bull. He's the fictional personification of Britain. His solid figure and Union Jack waistcoat make him very recognizable. The soldiers in the background are those who already enlisted in the British army. They stand ready to fight under the command of their country. They are needed because war is raging behind them.

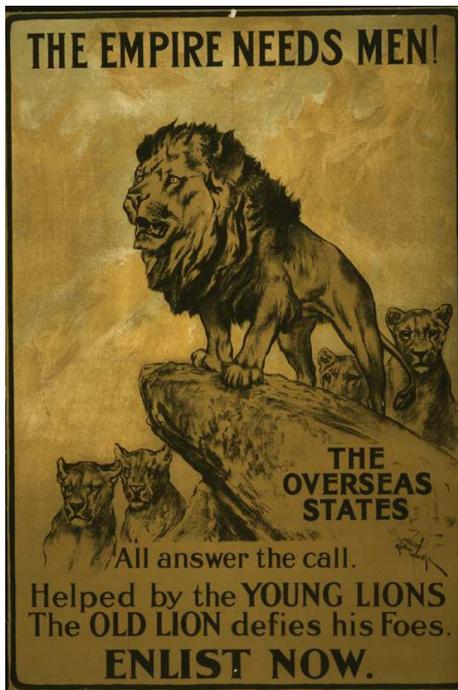
This is a recruiting poster made by the Parliamentary Recruiting Committee (PRC) which was in charge of aiding the raising of troop numbers. This was necessary because at the beginning of the war, the British army was a volunteer army: no man could be forced to join. Soldiers had to enlist voluntarily. That was fine in 1914 because everybody thought the war would be a quick victory. But in 1915, when the poster was published, it had become obvious that the war would last longer than expected and that it would require many more men than anticipated.

The poster functions on guilt: the passer-by, if he is a fit, young man, like the soldiers in the background, should feel guilty of not helping his country in times of need.

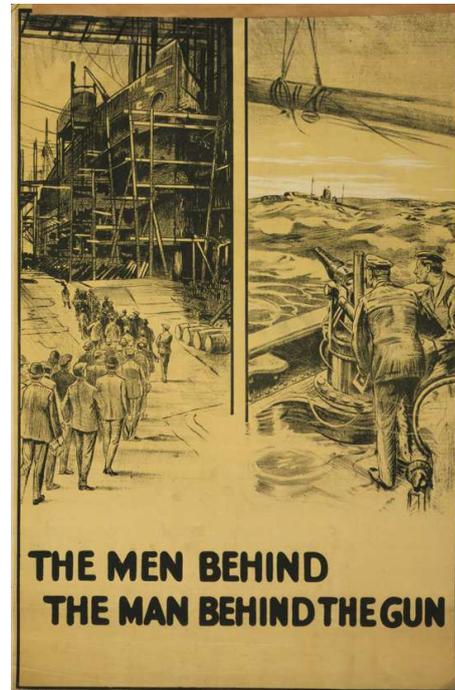
Conclusion

The poster is still quite famous today. Its simplicity made it stand out among the other posters. It's hard to tell to what extent the poster was efficient but one can definitely say that it was not efficient enough. In 1916, the British Parliament passed the Military Service Act which imposed conscription on all men aged between 18 and 41. Recruiting posters became unnecessary after that.

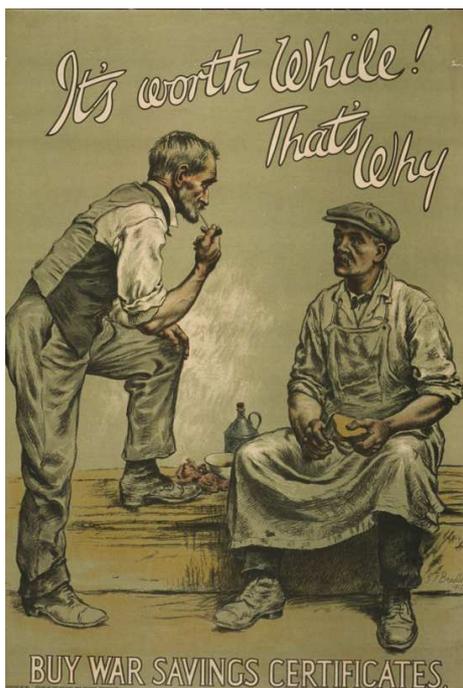
Famous posters through the empire



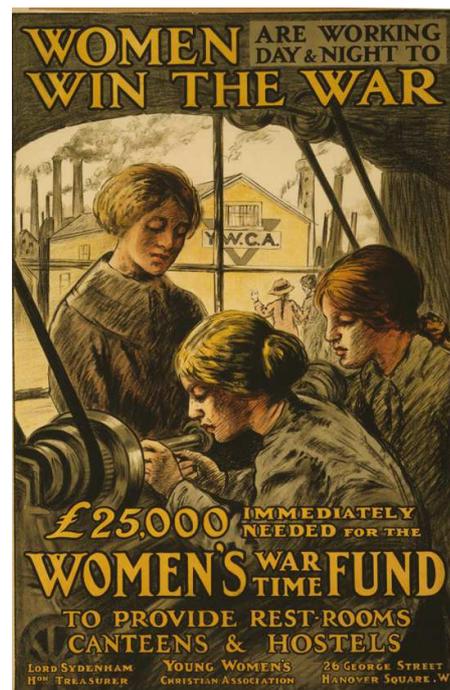
Poster 1: The empire needs men!
London, 1915
<http://www.loc.gov>



Poster 2: The men behind the man behind the gun
Great Britain, 1917
<http://www.loc.gov>



Poster 3: It's worth while! That's why.
London, 1917
<http://www.loc.gov>



Poster 4: Women are working day and night to win the war / London, 1915
<http://www.loc.gov>



Poster 5: Once a German, always a German
 London, 1918
<http://www.loc.gov>



Poster 6: Canada's pork opportunity Hamilton
 (Ontario, Canada), between 1914 and 1918
<http://www.loc.gov>



Poster 7: Help to catch Huns
 Canada, 1918
<http://www.loc.gov>



Poster 8: The trumpet calls
 Sydney, between 1914 and 1918
<http://www.loc.gov>



Poster 9: Help
 Sydney, between 1914 and 1918
<http://www.loc.gov>

Task

Create groups of 2 or 3.

Each group should pick a different poster and prepare an oral presentation of the poster similar to the one you just read about the “Who’s absent?” poster.

Therefore, you should:

1. Present the source
2. Describe the poster with as many details as you can
3. Analyze the poster
4. Make a quick conclusion

Beware! For a successful oral presentation, you need to write down notes and not a text containing full sentences.

Oral presentations

When you listen to the oral presentations of the other groups, determine if the poster addresses one or several of the following subjects and try to answer the related questions.

1. Army recruiting

What should trigger the passer-by into enlisting?

2. The participation of civilians to the war effort

How are civilians supposed to help?

What should trigger them into helping?

3. A world war

How and why are non-Europeans drawn into the war?

4. A violent war?

How is the war depicted on the propaganda posters? Why?